

Desert Warbler in Dorset: a species new to Britain and Ireland

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Early on the afternoon of 16th December 1970 Grahame Walbridge left his home at Weston, Portland, Dorset, intending to walk to the bird observatory at Portland Bill, some 3 km distant. Within minutes, as he skirted a weed-grown patch of ground on a building site, he came across a small umber-coloured *Sylvia* warbler flitting busily in the low vegetation. He watched it for long enough to assimilate its salient features and then hurried to the observatory where he reported his discovery to my wife and me. The three of us returned to the site by car and after about half an hour's search we rediscovered the bird.

The weather at the time was mild and reasonably calm during a lull between a procession of Atlantic low pressure systems. The afternoon was heavily overcast and the light far from good. This was, however, compensated by the bird's approachability. For most of the time it remained either actually on the ground or in low weeds, mostly bristly ox-tongue *Picris echioides*, allowing us within five metres without showing undue alarm. On one occasion we watched it hopping along newly laid kerbstones and, when some children approached, it darted into a stack of land-drain pipes and the group passed within a metre or so of it.

We failed to add significantly to the field description already obtained by G.W. The upperparts were uniform tan-brown, the underparts greyish-white. There were no salient facial features and no sharp demarcation between the throat and the face. The bill was yellow with a black tip, and the legs pale flesh with a faint greenish tinge. There was no significant orbital ring, but the iris was yellow, although this could be seen in the field only at very close range. White was visible on each side of the brown tail in flight.

We quickly realised that it was necessary to capture the bird if we were to solve the problem of its identity. We erected a single-panel mist-net and caught it with little difficulty, but by this time the light was failing quickly, so we carried it back to the observatory. After a detailed description and measurements had been taken, it was roosted at room temperature in a darkened box, since it was clearly too late for it to feed. The following is a transcript of the description:

Upperparts: forehead, crown, nape and mantle uniform pale earth-brown with ashy tinge; rump and uppertail-coverts noticeably more russet; sides of head without distinguishing features, the ash-brown merging imperceptibly into greyish-white; no orbital ring apparent, although faint whitish flecks visible in some lights in region of eye-sockets; ear-coverts pale grey, no different from remainder of facial region. *Underparts*: pearly grey, due to grey feather fringes (bases being whiter), with no particular paleness on chin or throat, but buff suffusion on flanks and undertail-coverts. *Wings*: primaries black-brown with ashy wash and very faint pale buff fringes; secondaries similar, but less dark and with broader pale buff fringes; outer webs of tertials grey-brown and inner webs pale chestnut, separated by noticeable blackish shaft streak; outermost tertial darker brown with paler fringes on both webs; greater and median coverts ash-brown; lesser coverts distinctly more greyish; alula mainly blackish, contrasting with the brown coverts, but outer feather with slender rim of pale buff, median with broad fringe of pale buff, and inner mostly pale with blackish centre. *Tail*: outermost feathers on right side just breaking out of pin, showing white; outermost on left side mostly greyish-white but basal half of inner web with narrowing blackish streak; penultimate on left side in pin; other feathers brown and centre pair more russet. *Bare parts*: upper mandible pale yellow with black tip, culmen and area round nostril; lower mandible entirely yellow with very slight darkness towards tip; tarsus creamy flesh (greenish tinge noted in field not discernible in hand); iris chrome-yellow. *Wing-formula*: 3rd and 4th primaries equal and longest, 5th —0.5 mm, 6th —2.0 mm, 2nd —3.5 mm, 7th —4.5 mm, 10th —9.0 mm; 1st 2.5 mm longer than longest primary covert; 3rd, 4th and 5th emarginated on outer webs, 6th with possibly a trace. *Measurements*: wing 58.5 mm; bill (from skull) 11.5 mm; tarsus 18.5 mm; tail 50 mm with no more than 3 mm difference between shortest and longest feathers.

After some hours of consulting the literature, we were able to satisfy ourselves that the bird was a Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*, but we did not disturb it from the time of our detailed examination until first light on the following day. Unfortunately the morning dawned wet and windy, with appalling light conditions, and as a result our hopes of photography were dashed. Some photographs were taken with the aid of photo-flood illumination, but because I was anxious that the bird should have an opportunity to feed as quickly as possible I released it shortly after 09.00 hours. It flew out of the observatory garden into an adjoining field of sprouting barley. At the time of release it weighed 9.45 gm.

Soon after midday the weather cleared and the bird then appeared in the observatory garden. It established a pattern of behaviour which enabled a great many other observers to see it in the course of the next two weeks, spending periods of between a few minutes and an hour or so feeding on the ground in the barley shoots (then about 15 cm in height) and in the meantime preening on bushes near-by, most frequently in a large elder in which it could be seen easily and well. During wet weather it became bedraggled very quickly (presumably through constant contact with the lush cereal shoots) and preening was much more frequent and prolonged. A feature which then became noticeable, and which could be seen even when the bird was a mere

speck some 150 metres away, was its habit of bobbing, head up and tail down, then tail up and head down, almost as if pivoting through the centre of the body.

The bird was present daily until 25th December when a spell of severe weather with frost, snow and icy east winds made it very difficult to locate. It was seen briefly on 27th, but it then disappeared and we imagined that it had succumbed. At dusk on 1st January 1971, however, G.W. and I discovered it again, our attention being attracted initially by a sharp 'wee-churr' call with something of the rhythm of that of a Partridge *Perdix perdix*. Neither of us had heard this note before, although we had both heard the bird utter a faint sub-song. On 2nd January it had reverted to its old habits (the weather by then becoming milder), but early on 3rd ploughing operations started in the barley field and diligent searches that day and subsequently failed to reveal it.

IDENTIFICATION

The problem of identification was perplexing, both in the field and initially in the hand. The bird was assumed to be one of the Mediterranean *Sylvia* warblers, perhaps in first-year plumage, and a quick check through Williamson (1964) soon revealed that on measurements and structure it could be Spectacled *S. conspicillata* or Subalpine *S. cantillans*, or even Ménétries' *S. mystacea* or Tristram's *S. deserticola*. east Africa in winter was commented on by Moreau (1966). The majority of the specimens in the British Museum were taken in winter in northern India: all of these exhibited the bright, creamy white underparts noted by Williamson. I noticed, however, that a few collected in Somalia in winter showed a trace of greyness below, though none so markedly as the Portland bird.

Desert Warblers had been recorded twice previously in western Europe, at Ottenby, Öland, Sweden, on 20th October 1961 and near Turku, Finland, on 26th October 1963 (Williamson 1968). It seems unlikely that the one at Portland arrived in Britain in mid-December, particularly as the weather conditions then were predominantly westerly, and it would probably be safer to assume that it had already been in the vicinity for some time, perhaps weeks; its ability to maintain itself unobtrusively in a small area was amply demonstrated after its release, and its presence on some rarely visited part of the Isle of Portland could well have been missed. I was able to recall an occasion during the preceding autumn (precise date not noted) when I had had a fleeting glimpse of an unfamiliar *Sylvia* warbler in the fields near Southwell, Portland, but this vague impression by no means detracts from the credit due to the young observer whose alertness and careful observation led to this first record for Britain and Ireland.

Quite obviously it bore no resemblance to adults of these species as depicted in the *Field Guide* and in Etchécopar and Hüe (1967). Furthermore, the plumage descriptions given by Swift (1959) and Sharrock (1962) for juvenile Spectacled and Subalpine revealed that it could not be assigned to either of those species. In size and shape, however, it closely resembled a Subalpine Warbler and this similarity of structure made me certain that it was a *Sylvia*.

I had discounted the possibility of its being a Desert Warbler at first, since I thought that this species was so pallid in general coloration as to be unmistakable, a conception heightened by the illustration in Etchécopar and Hüe showing *S. nana deserti* to be of an almost ethereal pallor. My wife and I worked systematically through Williamson attempting to match the bird with every species in the genus and the process reached fruition when we discovered that not only did it fit *S. nana* on measurements but also on certain plumage features, particularly the russet rump, the dark-shafted tertials and the coloration of the soft parts. The only points of divergence were the colour of the underparts, quite clearly greyish rather than creamy as given by Williamson (see below), and the lack of white on the third outermost tail-feathers.

FIELD CHARACTERS

Once the possibility of vagrancy in this species has been realised, its identification in the field is not difficult, since it is quite obviously a *Sylvia* warbler and no other species exhibits the same uniform tan-coloured upperparts without distinguishing features in the facial region. The Portland bird had an obvious predilection to feed on the ground, but showed no reluctance to skulk in the manner of a *Locustella*. The black-yellow-black patterning of the bill and the pale leg coloration were striking, but the yellow iris and black alula could be seen in the field only at very close range and these characters were most apparent in the hand. To what extent the bobbing, pivoting action when perched is typical of the species is not known.

DISCUSSION

Through the courtesy of the British Museum (Natural History), I was able to examine an extensive series of skins while the details of the bird were still fresh in my mind. One glance was sufficient to confirm that it was of the nominate race of *Sylvia nana*. The difference between skins of this race, with its plain brown mantle, and of the golden sand-coloured *S. n. deserti* of north-west Africa was stark.

The breeding range of the nominate form extends from the Kalmuk Steppes (west of the lower Volga) east to central Asia and south to southern Iran, and the winter quarters from the Red Sea area to north-west India (Vaurie 1959). The south-westerly movement into north-

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